Brittany Prater, MSN RN
Birmingham, AL
By Kiara C. Jones

Brittany Prater’s mother was sick throughout her entire childhood. After 15 years of seeing numerous doctors and specialists while suffering with no answers, it was a nurse who figured out what was wrong with her. “We finally ended up at a doctor’s office … where the nurses actually treated her like a person. They didn’t treat her like a data statistic. Or, just like an item.” Her mother was finally diagnosed with lupus and stage 3 kidney disease. The diagnosis was a heartbreaking relief. For years, medical professionals had been acting as though her mother’s symptoms were fabricated. With the diagnosis, her doctors made a 180. “They treated her like her pain was real and things that she was experiencing were real.” Her mom’s condition was diagnosed as Sjogren’s syndrome, an autoimmune disorder that was making her immune system attack its own cells. Her mother’s road to recovery was destined to be a long one.

Brittany had a difficult choice to make. She was 19 and was accepted to the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Medicine (UAB). She was committed to providing hands-on support for her mom through recovery, but she knew she would have limited time as a pre-med student. She declined the acceptance without even telling her mother. “I was planning to do surgery or become a cardiologist, which would take me anywhere from 9 to 13 years.” Getting her doctorate as a Nurse Practitioner could be done on a fast track in 3.5 years and allow her the flexibility to help her mom. UAB supports and cultivates its homegrown talent and has a program to repay tuition if students choose to stay and work in its hospital. But it was more than that for Brittany. “I chose nursing because I am a very hands-on person. I like to spend time with patients and people, get to know them, and educate them to care for themselves.”

Brittany was weeks away from completing her nursing degree when everything changed. She was making rounds, shadowing nurses, and visiting a variety of hospitals to gain her clinical experience. “I think I was in my preceptorship for two weeks when the world stopped.” Brittany says it was a surreal moment she will never forget. “We were in class. I had an exam, and a few of us went to open lab to practice our skills. All four of our professors

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came into the room and said, ‘Hey, we're not going to go to clinical exams. We're going to let you go home. We're trying to figure out some stuff. Just be alert on your email.’” They all went home, and around about 9 p.m. they received a mass email from UAB saying that their spring break was going to start a week early and they had a week extension. The university was shutting down. “Any major university that has a teaching hospital attached to it does not shut down. It just never does. So once we got that email saying that it was shut down, we knew that this is serious. Something is going on that's changing, not only our community, but it's worldwide.” It would be nearly four months before Brittany would see the inside of her hospital again. “I went from basically living at school to seeing the four walls of my home 24 hours a day.”

Beyond her four walls and the news of the pandemic, there was another virus attacking our nation -- racism. The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Aubery were flooding the news, and the Black Lives Matter movement pushed into overdrive. Brittany was overwhelmed by the inhumanity. “It was sad. At the same time, I didn’t know whether to scream or to cry.” Basically, she did both. She was worried for her husband, who still had to report to work every day amid the spread of the disease and racial tension. “Being an African American male, he's been pulled over plenty of times, you know, for no reason. And so every time he left the house the first thing in my mind was, God, just let my husband come back home safe and sound.” Brittany has been directly impacted by racism and has seen how important it is to battle the disease with the same commitment with which we are attacking the pandemic. “It’s scary, it's terrifying, and it's very stressful knowing that maybe patients don’t see you the same way and the other human beings don’t see you the same way.” She knows from experience that what happens is not as important as what we do when it happens. “I was shadowing the physician, and we went into a patient’s room. The family was Caucasian, and when I walked into the room with the physician, they all stopped talking. I thought it was probably because the family wanted to hear what the physician was saying. The physician began explaining what was going on with the patient, next steps, planning, care, and all that good stuff. Then the older gentleman came up to the physician and whispered something.” The physician asked Brittany to step outside. She obliged, thinking there may be a HIPPA concern. Then he brought her back into the room. “This man, which is why he was my mentor to this day, explained to them that it doesn't matter the color of a person’s skin. If they’re equipped
to save someone’s life, that’s all that matters. At that point in time, I said to myself, ‘Wow, they didn’t want me in this room because of the color of my skin.’ They didn’t want me touching their loved one because of the color of my skin.” Brittany said she wasn’t angry or mad when it happened. “I was actually feeling proud because that physician stood up for me in that moment. Not later on. Not through an email. Not through a comment card. Not through a telephone call, but in person. He stood up for me at that moment, and that’s what’s supposed to happen.”

Brittany says racism can also be subtle. “There were plenty of times I had that experience where I walked into a patient’s room and they thought that I was Environmental Service, and there is nothing wrong with that. I mean, if it wasn’t for the individuals who came in and cleaned up the hospital rooms and things like that, we wouldn’t even be able to have the patients back at the hospitals. But, to automatically assume that that’s what I am makes my blood boil. But, also it puts the fire under me. If that’s what you think I am, that’s no problem, but let me show you who I am, what I know, and what I can do.”

Brittany says all of these experiences make her a better nurse. “It makes me strive to be the best that I can be. It makes me put in the extra hours to learn as much as I can, to be as knowledgeable about my field and the population as possible.” Brittany never forgets how her mother suffered and how the nurses helped her. “I want my patients to be seen as people. I want to impact them positively. I want them to know that I care about you as a person. I care about you as an entire entity.”